

*He tried to help the white and black.
Now that he's dead he can't do jack.*

Another student wrote these lines:

*America the beautiful,
Who are you beautiful for?*

"Frequently," says a teacher at another crowded high school in New York, "a student may be in the wrong class for a term and never know it." With only one counselor to 700 students system-wide in New York City, there is little help available to those who feel confused. It is not surprising, says the teacher, "that many find the experience so cold, impersonal and disheartening that they decide to stay home by the sad warmth of the TV set."

According to a recent study issued by the State Commissioner of Education, "as many as three out of four blacks" in New York City "and four out of five Latinos fail to complete high school within the traditional four-year period." The number of students of all races who drop out between ninth and twelfth grades, and do not return, and never finish school, remains a mystery in New York City. The *Times* itself, at various points, has offered estimates that range from 25 percent to nearly twice that high—a range of numbers that suggests how inconsistent and perplexing school board estimates appear even to seasoned journalists. Sara Rimer of the *New York Times* pegged the rate of those who do not graduate at 46 percent in 1990—a figure that seems credible because it is consistent with the numbers for most other cities with large nonwhite student populations. Including those who drop out during junior high—numbers not included in the dropout figures offered by the New York City Board of Education—it may be that roughly half of New York City's children do not finish school.

The school board goes to great extremes to understate these numbers, and now and then the press explains why numbers coming from the central office are not necessarily to be believed. Number-juggling by school boards—for ex-

ample, by devising "a new formula" of calculation to appease the public by appearing to show progress—is familiar all over the nation. The *Times*, for instance, notes in another article that, while the "official" dropout rate "has fallen from 45 percent to 29.2 percent," watchdog groups say that the alleged "improvement" stems from "changes in the way the number has been calculated." School boards, moreover, have a vested interest in low-balling dropout figures since the federal and state aid that they receive is pegged to actual attendance.

Listening to children who drop out of school, we often hear an awful note of anonymity. "I hated the school. . . . I never knew who my counselor was," a former New York City student says. "He wasn't available for me. . . . I saw him once. . . . One ten-minute interview. . . . That was all."

Chaos and anonymity overtake some of the elementary schools as well. "A child identified as a chronic truant," reports an official of the Rheedlen Foundation, a child welfare agency in New York City, "might be reported by the teacher—or he might not. Someone from the public school attendance office might try to contact the parents and might be successful, or he might not. The child might attend school again. Probably not." Several children of my acquaintance in the New York City schools were truant for eight months in 1988 and 1989 but were never phoned or visited by school attendance officers.

"We have children," says one grade-school principal, "who just disappear from the face of the earth."

This information strikes one as astonishing. How does a child simply "disappear" in New York City? Efficiency in information transfer—when it comes to stock transactions, for example—is one of the city's best-developed skills. Why is it so difficult to keep track of poor children? When the school board loses track of hundreds of poor children, the explanations given by the city point to "managerial dilemmas" and to "problems" in a new computer system. The same dilemmas are advanced as explanations for the city's inability to get books into classrooms in sufficient numbers for the class enrollments, or to paint the walls or keep the roofs from leaking. But managerial dilemmas never quite suffice to jus-

tify these failures. A city which is home to some of the most clever and aggressive and ingenious men and women in the world surely could devise more orderly and less humiliating ways to meet the needs of these poor children. Failure to do so rests in explanations other than a flawed administration, but the city and, particularly, its press appear to favor the administrative explanation. It defuses anger at injustice and replaces it with irritation at bureaucracy.

New York City manages expertly, and with marvelous predictability, whatever it considers humanly important. Fax machines, computers, automated telephones and even messengers on bikes convey a million bits of data through Manhattan every day to guarantee that Wall Street brokers get their orders placed, confirmed, delivered, at the moment they demand. But leaking roofs cannot be fixed and books cannot be gotten into Morris High in time to meet the fall enrollment. Efficiency in educational provision for low-income children, as in health care and most other elements of existence, is secreted and doled out by our municipalities as if it were a scarce resource. Like kindness, cleanliness and promptness of provision, it is not secured by gravity of need but by the cash, skin color and class status of the applicant.

At a high school in Crown Heights, a neighborhood of Brooklyn, "bathrooms, gymnasiums, hallways and closets" have been converted into classrooms, says the *New York Times*. "We have no closets—they're classrooms now," says the principal of another school. "We went to a school," says Robert Wagner, former president of the city's Board of Education, "where there were five Haitian youngsters literally [having classes] in a urinal."

At P.S. 94 in District 10, where 1,300 children study in a building suitable for 700, the gym has been transformed into four noisy, makeshift classrooms. The gym teacher improvises with no gym. A reading teacher, in whose room "huge pieces of a ceiling" have collapsed, according to the *Times*, "covering the floor, the desks and the books," describes the rain that spills in through the roof. "If society gave a damn about these children," says the teacher, "they wouldn't let this happen." These are the same conditions I

observed in Boston's segregated schools a quarter-century ago. Nothing has changed.

A class of third grade children at the school has four different teachers in a five-month span in 1989. "We get dizzy," says one child in the class. The only social worker in the school has 30 minutes in a week to help a troubled child. Her caseload holds the names of nearly 80 children. The only truant officer available, who splits her time between this and three other schools in District 10—the district has ten truant officers, in all, for 36,000 children—is responsible for finding and retrieving no less than 400 children at a given time.

When a school board hires just *one* woman to retrieve 400 missing children from the streets of the North Bronx, we may reasonably conclude that it does not particularly desire to find them. If 100 of these children startled us by showing up at school, moreover, there would be no room for them in P.S. 94. The building couldn't hold them.

Many of these problems, says the press again, may be attributed to inefficiency and certain very special bureaucratic difficulties in the New York City system. As we have seen, however, comparable problems are apparent in Chicago, and the same conditions are routinely found in other systems serving mainly nonwhite children. The systems and bureaucracies are different. What is consistent is that all of them are serving children who are viewed as having little value to America.

One way of establishing the value we attribute to a given group of children is to look at the medical provision that we make for them. The usual indices of school investment and performance—class size, teacher salaries and test results—are at best imperfect tools of measurement; but infant survival rates are absolute.

In Central Harlem, notes the *New York Times*, the infant death rate is the same as in Malaysia. Among black children in East Harlem, it is even higher: 42 per thousand, which would be considered high in many Third World nations. "A child's chance of surviving to age five," notes New Jersey

Senator Bill Bradley, "are better in Bangladesh than in East Harlem." In the South Bronx, says the author of a recent study by the nonprofit United Hospital Fund of New York City, 531 infants out of 1,000 require neonatal hospitalization—a remarkable statistic that portends high rates of retardation and brain damage. In Riverdale, by contrast, only 69 infants in 1,000 call for such attention.

What is promised these poor children and their parents, says Professor Eli Ginzberg of Columbia University, is "an essential level" of care as "distinct from optimal." Equity, he states, is "out of the question." In a similar way, the *New York Times* observes, a lower quality of education for poor children in New York, as elsewhere in America, is "accepted as a fact." Inequality, whether in hospitals or schools, is simply not contested. Any suggestion that poor people in New York will get the same good health care as the rich or middle class, says Dr. Ginzberg, is "inherently nonsensical."

The *New York Times* describes some public hospitals in which there is "no working microscope" to study sputum samples, no gauze or syringes "to collect blood samples." A couple of years ago, says a physician at the city's Bellevue Hospital, "we were running out of sutures in the operating room." Two years before, Harlem Hospital ran out of penicillin.

"Out-and-out racism, which in our city and our society is institutionalized," said David Dinkins in 1987, a year before he was elected mayor, "has allowed this to go on for years."

But the racial explanation is aggressively rejected by the medical establishment. The *Journal of the American Medical Association*, for example, seeking to explain the differences in care provided to the white and nonwhite, speculates that "cultural differences" in patients' attitudes toward modern care may be involved. White people, says the *Journal*, "may prefer a more technological approach. . . ."

A doctor at Cook County Hospital in Chicago has another explanation. "I think," he says, "there's a different subjective response on the part of doctors. . . ." And, in explanation of the fact that white patients in cardiac care are two to three times as likely as black patients to be given by-

pass surgery, he wonders whether white physicians may be "less inclined to invest in a black patient's heart" than in the heart of a "white, middle-class executive" because the future economic value of the white man, who is far more likely to return to a productive job, is often so much higher. Investment strategies in education, as we've seen, are often framed in the same terms: "How much is it worth investing in *this* child as opposed to *that* one? Where will we see the best return?" Although respectable newspapers rarely pose the question in these chilling terms, it is clear that certain choices have been made: Who shall be educated? Who shall live? Who is likely to return the most to our society?

A doctor who has worked for many years in the South Bronx notes that views like these are masked by our apparently benevolent attempts to rectify the damage that we have permitted: "Once these babies, damaged by denial of sufficient health care for their mothers, have been born impaired, we hook them up to tubes and place them on a heated table in an isolette and do our very best to save their lives. It seems that we do not want them to die. Much is made in press reports of our provision for these infants; it may even be that we are prone to praise ourselves for these expensive efforts. But, like the often costly salvage programs of teen-age remediation for the children we have first denied the opportunity for health care, then for preschool, then for equal education, these special wards for damaged infants are provisions of obligatory mercy which are needed only as a consequence of our refusal to provide initial justice."

Health officials sometimes fend off criticism of this nature by assuring us that better facilities or more elaborate surgical procedures offered to rich patients do not necessarily pay off in every case, just as we are often told that higher funding for the schools attended by more affluent children does not necessarily imply superior education. What may be at stake among the wealthy, says the AMA, is "overutilization."

Overutilization is a fact of life in modern medicine—and it raises costs for all prospective patients over the long run—but one feels a troubling uneasiness about the way in which this argument is introduced. "It is," says the doctor I

have cited, "an intriguing explanation. Perhaps, these people seem to say, the point is not that blacks receive too little but that whites receive too much. The second point may be correct, but there is something that I find insidious about the way this point is used. You could also argue, I suppose, that children at expensive high schools do not really profit from their access to so many books, so many foreign languages, so many high-paid teachers, and may even suffer from exposure to so many guidance counselors. We have the right to raise our eyebrows, nonetheless, when 'overutilization' by the very rich has been permitted to continue at the very time that we are told to question whether it much matters. If it doesn't matter, cancel it for everybody. Don't give to them, deny it to us, then ask us to believe that it is not significant."

One consequence of medical and early educational denial is the virtual destruction of the learning skills of many children by the time they get to secondary school. Knowing one is ruined is a powerful incentive to destroy the learning opportunities for other children, and the consequence in many schools is nearly uncontrollable disruption.

Two years ago, in order to meet this and other problems, New York City's Office of School Safety started buying handcuffs. Some 2,300 pairs were purchased for a system that contains almost 1,000 schools: an average of two pairs of handcuffs for each school. "It is no doubt possible," the weekly *New York Observer* editorializes, "to obtain improvements in discipline and even in test scores and dropout rates" by "turning schools into disciplinary barracks." But the paper questions whether such a regimen is ideal preparation for life in a democratic nation.

Handcuffs, however, may be better preparation than we realize for the lives that many of these adolescent kids will lead. According to the New York City Department of Corrections, 90 percent of the male inmates of the city's prisons are the former dropouts of the city's public schools. Incarceration of each inmate, the department notes, costs the city nearly \$60,000 every year.

Handcuffs draw the attention of the press because they are a graphic symbol of so many other problems. But far

more damaging, I am convinced, are the more subtle manacles of racial patterns in assignment and school tracking. Few things can injure a child more, or do more damage to the child's self-esteem, than to be locked into a bottom-level track as early as the first or second grade. Add to this the squalor of the setting and the ever-present message of a child's racial isolation, and we have in place an almost perfect instrument to guarantee that we will need more handcuffs and, no doubt, more prisons.

The slotting of black children into lower tracks, according to the Public Education Association of New York, is a familiar practice in the city: "Classes for the emotionally handicapped, neurologically impaired, learning disabled and educable mentally retarded are disproportionately black. . . . Classes for the speech, language, and hearing impaired are disproportionately Hispanic." Citywide, the association adds, fewer than 10 percent of children slotted in these special tracks will graduate from school. Nationwide, black children are three times as likely as white children to be placed in classes for the mentally retarded but only half as likely to be placed in classes for the gifted: a well-known statistic that should long since have aroused a sense of utter shame in our society. Most shameful is the fact that no such outrage can be stirred in New York City.

This is the case with almost every aspect of the degradation of poor children in New York. Even the most thorough exposition of the facts within the major organs of the press is neutralized too frequently by context and a predilection for the type of grayish language that denies the possibilities for indignation. Facts are cited. Editorials are written. Five years later, the same facts are cited once again. There is no sense of moral urgency; and nothing changes.

The differences between school districts and *within* school districts in the city are, however, almost insignificant compared to those between the city and the world of affluence around it—in Westchester County, for example, and in largely prosperous Long Island.

Even in the suburbs, nonetheless, it has been noted that a differential system still exists, and it may not be surprising

to discover that the differences are once again determined by the social class, parental wealth, and sometimes race, of the schoolchildren. A study, a few years ago, of 20 of the wealthiest and poorest districts of Long Island, for example, matched by location and size of enrollment, found that the differences in per-pupil spending were not only large but had approximately doubled in a five-year period. Schools, in Great Neck, in 1987, spent \$11,265 for each pupil. In affluent Jericho and Manhasset the figures were, respectively, \$11,325 and \$11,370. In Oyster Bay the figure was \$9,980. Compare this to Levittown, also on Long Island but a town of mostly working-class white families, where per-pupil spending dropped to \$6,900. Then compare these numbers to the spending level in the town of Roosevelt, the poorest district in the county, where the schools are 99 percent non-white and where the figure dropped to \$6,340. Finally, consider New York City, where, in the same year, \$5,590 was invested in each pupil—less than half of what was spent in Great Neck. The pattern is almost identical to that which we have seen outside Chicago.

Again, look at Westchester County, where, in the same year, the same range of discrepancies was found. Affluent Bronxville, an attractive suburb just north of the Bronx, spent \$10,000 for each pupil. Chappaqua's yearly spending figure rose above \$9,000. Studying the chart again, we locate Yonkers—a blue-collar town that is predominantly white but where over half the student population is nonwhite—and we find the figure drops to \$7,400. This is not the lowest figure, though. The lowest-spending schools within Westchester, spending a full thousand dollars less than Yonkers, serve the suburb of Mount Vernon, where three quarters of the children in the public schools are black.

"If you're looking for a home," a realtor notes, "you can look at the charts for school expenditures and use them to determine if your neighbors will be white and wealthy or, conversely, black or white but poor."

Newsday, a Long Island paper, notes that these comparisons are studied with great interest by home-buyers. Indeed, the paper notes, the state's exhaustive compilation, "Statistical Profiles of Public School Districts," has unexpectedly be-

come a small best-seller. People who want to know if public schools in areas where they are planning to buy homes are actually as good as it is claimed in real-estate brochures, according to *Newsday*, now can use the "Statistical Profiles" as a more authoritative source. Superintendents in some districts say the publication, which compares student performance, spending, staff and such in every state school system, "will be useful for home-buyers." For real-estate agents in the highest-rated districts, the appearance of this publication is good news. It helps to elevate the value of the homes they have for sale.

In effect, a circular phenomenon evolves: The richer districts—those in which the property lots and houses are more highly valued—have more revenue, derived from taxing land and homes, to fund their public schools. The reputation of the schools, in turn, adds to the value of their homes, and this, in turn, expands the tax base for their public schools. The fact that they can levy lower taxes than the poorer districts, but exact more money, raises values even more; and this, again, means further funds for smaller classes and for higher teacher salaries within their public schools. Few of the children in the schools of Roosevelt or Mount Vernon will, as a result, be likely to compete effectively with kids in Great Neck and Manhasset for admissions to the better local colleges and universities of New York state. Even fewer will compete for more exclusive Ivy League admissions. And few of the graduates or dropouts of those poorer systems, as a consequence, are likely ever to earn enough to buy a home in Great Neck or Manhasset.

The New York State Commissioner of Education cautions parents not to make "the judgment that a district is good because the scores are good, or bad because the scores are bad." This, we will find, is a recurrent theme in public statements on this issue, and the commissioner is correct, of course, that overemphasis on test scores, when the differences are slight, can be deceptive. But it may be somewhat disingenuous to act as if the larger differences do not effectively predict success or failure for large numbers of schoolchildren. Certainly home-buyers will be easily convinced that schools in Jericho, third-highest-spending district on Long

Island, where the dropout rate is an astonishing and enviable "zero" and where all but 3 percent of seniors go to college, are likely to be "good" compared to those of New York City, which spends only half as much per pupil and where only half the students ever graduate.

An apparent obligation of officials in these situations is to shelter the recipients of privilege from the potential wrath of those who are less favored. Officials manage, in effect, to broadcast a dual message. To their friends they say, in private, "This is the best place to buy a home. These are the best schools. These are the hospitals. These are the physicians." For the record, however, they assure the public that these numbers must not be regarded as implying any drastic differentials.

"The question," says the New York State Commissioner, is not how good the test scores look, but "how well is the district doing by the children it enrolls?" This will bring to mind the statement of New Trier High School's former head of student services. ("This school is right," he said, "for this community." It wouldn't, however, be "right" for everyone.) It does not require much political sophistication to decode these statements—no more than it requires to discern what is at stake when scholars at conservative foundations tell us that black children and white children may have "different learning styles" and require "different strategies" and maybe "different schools."

The commissioner's question—"How well is the district doing by the children it enrolls?"—sounds reasonable. But the answers that are given to that question, as we know, will be determined by class expectations. The schools of the South Bronx—not many, but a few at least—are "doing well" by future typists, auto mechanics, office clerks and factory employees. The schools of Great Neck are "doing well" by those who will someday employ them.

There is a certain grim aesthetic in the almost perfect upward scaling of expenditures from poorest of the poor to richest of the rich within the New York City area: \$5,590 for the children of the Bronx and Harlem, \$6,340 for the non-white kids of Roosevelt, \$6,400 for the black kids of Mount Vernon, \$7,400 for the slightly better-off community of

Yonkers, over \$11,000 for the very lucky children of Manhasset, Jericho and Great Neck. In an ethical society, where money was apportioned in accord with need, these scalings would run almost in precise reverse.

The point is often made that, even with a genuine equality of schooling for poor children, other forces still would militate against their school performance. Cultural and economic factors and the flight of middle-income blacks from inner cities still would have their consequences in the heightened concentration of the poorest children in the poorest neighborhoods. Teen-age pregnancy, drug use and other problems still would render many families in these neighborhoods all but dysfunctional. Nothing I have said within this book should leave the misimpression that I do not think these factors are enormously important. A polarization of this issue, whereby some insist upon the primacy of school, others upon the primacy of family and neighborhood, obscures the fact that both are elemental forces in the lives of children.

The family, however, differs from the school in the significant respect that government is not responsible, or at least not directly, for the inequalities of family background. It is responsible for inequalities in public education. The school is the creature of the state; the family is not. To the degree, moreover, that destructive family situations may be bettered by the future acts of government, no one expects that this could happen in the years immediately ahead. Schools, on the other hand, could make dramatic changes almost overnight if fiscal equity were a reality.

If the New York City schools were funded, for example, at the level of the highest-spending suburbs of Long Island, a fourth grade class of 36 children such as those I visited in District 10 would have had \$200,000 more invested in their education during 1987. Although a portion of this extra money would have gone into administrative costs, the remainder would have been enough to hire two extraordinary teachers at enticing salaries of \$50,000 each, divide the class into *two classes* of some 18 children each, provide them with computers, carpets, air conditioning, new texts and refer-

ence books and learning games—indeed, with everything available today in the most affluent school districts—and also pay the costs of extra counseling to help those children cope with the dilemmas that they face at home. Even the most skeptical detractor of “the worth of spending further money in the public schools” would hesitate, I think, to face a grade-school principal in the South Bronx and try to tell her that this “wouldn’t make much difference.”

It is obvious that urban schools have other problems in addition to their insufficient funding. Administrative chaos is endemic in some urban systems. (The fact that this in itself is a reflection of our low regard for children who depend upon these systems is a separate matter.) Greater funding, if it were intelligently applied, could partially correct these problems—by making possible, for instance, the employment of some very gifted, high-paid fiscal managers who could assure that money is well used—but it probably is also true that major structural reforms would still be needed. To polarize these points, however, and to argue, as the White House has been claiming for a decade, that administrative changes are a “better” answer to the problem than equality of funding and real efforts at desegregation is dishonest and simplistic. The suburbs have better administrations (sometimes, but not always), and they also have a lot more money in proportion to their children’s needs. To speak of the former and evade the latter is a formula that guarantees that nothing will be done *today* for children who have no responsibility for either problem.

To be in favor of “good families” or of “good administration” does not take much courage or originality. It is hard to think of anyone who is opposed to either. To be in favor of redistribution of resources and of racial integration would require a great deal of courage—and a soaring sense of vision—in a president or any other politician. Whether such courage or such vision will someday become transcendent forces in our nation is by no means clear.

The train ride from Grand Central Station to suburban Rye, New York, takes 35 to 40 minutes. The high school is a short ride from the station. Built of handsome gray stone

and set in a landscaped campus, it resembles a New England prep school. On a day in early June of 1990, I enter the school and am directed by a student to the office.

The principal, a relaxed, unhurried man who, unlike many urban principals, seems gratified to have me visit in his school, takes me in to see the auditorium, which, he says, was recently restored with private charitable funds (\$400,000) raised by parents. The crenellated ceiling, which is white and spotless, and the polished dark-wood paneling contrast with the collapsing structure of the auditorium at Morris High. The principal strikes his fist against the balcony: “They made this place extremely solid.” Through a window, one can see the spreading branches of a beech tree in the central courtyard of the school.

In a student lounge, a dozen seniors are relaxing on a carpeted floor that is constructed with a number of tiers so that, as the principal explains, “they can stretch out and be comfortable while reading.”

The library is wood-paneled, like the auditorium. Students, all of whom are white, are seated at private carrels, of which there are approximately 40. Some are doing homework; others are looking through the *New York Times*. Every student that I see during my visit to the school is white or Asian, though I later learn there are a number of Hispanic students and that 1 or 2 percent of students in the school are black.

According to the principal, the school has 96 computers for 546 children. The typical student, he says, studies a foreign language for four or five years, beginning in the junior high school, and a second foreign language (Latin is available) for two years. Of 140 seniors, 92 are now enrolled in AP classes. Maximum teacher salary will soon reach \$70,000. Per-pupil funding is above \$12,000 at the time I visit.

The students I meet include eleventh and twelfth graders. The teacher tells me that the class is reading Robert Coles, Studs Terkel, Alice Walker. He tells me I will find them more than willing to engage me in debate, and this turns out to be correct. Primed for my visit, it appears, they arrow in directly on the dual questions of equality and race.

Three general positions soon emerge and seem to be

accepted widely. The first is that the fiscal inequalities "do matter very much" in shaping what a school can offer ("That is obvious," one student says) and that any loss of funds in Rye, as a potential consequence of future equalizing, would be damaging to many things the town regards as quite essential.

The second position is that racial integration—for example, by the busing of black children from the city or a nonwhite suburb to this school—would meet with strong resistance, and the reason would not simply be the fear that certain standards might decline. The reason, several students say straightforwardly, is "racial" or, as others say it, "out-and-out racism" on the part of adults.

The third position voiced by many students, but not all, is that equity is basically a goal to be desired and should be pursued for moral reasons, but "will probably make no major difference" since poor children "still would lack the motivation" and "would probably fail in any case because of other problems."

At this point, I ask if they can truly say "it wouldn't make a difference" since it's never been attempted. Several students then seem to rethink their views and say that "it might work, but it would have to start with preschool and the elementary grades" and "it might be 20 years before we'd see a difference."

At this stage in the discussion, several students speak with some real feeling of the present inequalities, which, they say, are "obviously unfair," and one student goes a little further and proposes that "we need to change a lot more than the schools." Another says she'd favor racial integration "by whatever means—including busing—even if my parents disapprove." But a contradictory opinion also is expressed with a good deal of fervor and is stated by one student in a rather biting voice: "I don't see why we should do it. How could it be of benefit to us?"

Throughout the discussion, whatever the views the children voice, there is a degree of unreality about the whole exchange. The children are lucid and their language is well chosen and their arguments well made, but there is a sense that they are dealing with an issue that does not feel very vivid, and that nothing that we say about it to each other

really matters since it's "just a theoretical discussion." To a certain degree, the skillfulness and cleverness that they display seem to derive precisely from this sense of unreality. Questions of unfairness feel more like a geometric problem than a matter of humanity or conscience. A few of the students do break through the note of unreality, but, when they do, they cease to be so agile in their use of words and speak more awkwardly. Ethical challenges seem to threaten their effectiveness. There is the sense that they were skating over ice and that the issues we addressed were safely frozen underneath. When they stop to look beneath the ice they start to stumble. The verbal competence they have acquired here may have been gained by building walls around some regions of the heart.

"I don't think that busing students from their ghetto to a different school would do much good," one student says. "You can take them out of the environment, but you can't take the environment out of *them*. If someone grows up in the South Bronx, he's not going to be prone to learn." His name is Max and he has short black hair and speaks with confidence. "Busing didn't work when it was tried," he says. I ask him how he knows this and he says he saw a television movie about Boston.

"I agree that it's unfair the way it is," another student says. "We have AP courses and they don't. Our classes are much smaller." But, she says, "putting them in schools like ours is not the answer. Why not put some AP classes into *their* school? Fix the roof and paint the halls so it will not be so depressing."

The students know the term "separate but equal," but seem unaware of its historical associations. "Keep them where they are but make it equal," says a girl in the front row.

A student named Jennifer, whose manner of speech is somewhat less refined and polished than that of the others, tells me that her parents came here from New York. "My family is originally from the Bronx. Schools are hell there. That's one reason that we moved. I don't think it's our responsibility to pay our taxes to provide for *them*. I mean, my parents used to live there and they wanted to get out. There's

no point in coming to a place like this, where schools are good, and then your taxes go back to the place where you began."

I bait her a bit: "Do you mean that, now that you are not in hell, you have no feeling for the people that you left behind?"

"It has to be the people in the area who want an education. If your parents just don't care, it won't do any good to spend a lot of money. Someone else can't want a good life for you. You have got to want it for yourself." Then she adds, however, "I agree that everyone should have a chance at taking the same courses. . . ."

I ask her if she'd think it fair to pay more taxes so that this was possible.

"I don't see how that benefits me," she says.

It occurs to me how hard it would have been for anyone to make that kind of statement, even in the wealthiest suburban school, in 1968. Her classmates would have been unsettled by the voicing of such undisguised self-interest. Here in Rye, in 1990, she can say this with impunity. She's an interesting girl and I reluctantly admire her for being so straightforward.

Max raises a different point. "I'm not convinced," he says, "that AP courses would be valued in the Bronx. Not everyone is going to go to college."

Jennifer picks up on this and carries it a little further. "The point," she says, "is that you cannot give an equal chance to every single person. If you did it, you'd be changing the whole economic system. Let's be honest. If you equalize the money, someone's got to be shortchanged. I don't doubt that children in the Bronx are getting a bad deal. But do we want *everyone* to get a mediocre education?"

"The other point," says Max, "is that you need to match the money that you spend to whether children in the school can profit from it. We get twice as much as kids in the South Bronx, but our school is *more* than twice as good and that's because of who is here. Money isn't the whole story. . . ."

"In New York," says Jennifer, "rich people put their kids in private school. If we equalize between New York and Rye, you would see the same thing happen here. People would

pull out their kids. Some people do it now. So it would happen a lot more."

An eleventh grader shakes her head at this. "Poor children need more money. It's as simple as that," she says. "Money comes from taxes. If we have it, we should pay it."

It is at this point that a boy named David picks up on a statement made before. "Someone said just now that this is not our obligation, our responsibility. I don't think that that's the question. I don't think you'd do it, pay more taxes or whatever, out of obligation. You would do it just because . . . it is unfair the way it is." He falters on these words and looks a bit embarrassed. Unlike many of the other students who have spoken, he is somewhat hesitant and seems to choke up on his words. "Well, it's easy for me to be sitting here and say I'd spend my parents' money. I'm not working. I don't earn the money. I don't need to be conservative until I do. I can be as open-minded and unrealistic as I want to be. You can be a liberal until you have a mortgage."

I ask him what he'd likely say if he were ten years older. "Hopefully," he says, "my values would remain the same. But I know that having money does affect you. This, at least, is what they tell me."

Spurred perhaps by David's words, another student says, "The biggest tax that people pay is to the federal government. Why not take some money from the budget that we spend on armaments and use it for the children in these urban schools?"

A well-dressed student with a healthy tan, however, says that using federal taxes for the poor "would be like giving charity," and "charitable things have never worked. . . . Charity will not instill the poor with self-respect."

Max returns to something that he said before: "The environment is everything. It's going to take something more than money." He goes on to speak of inefficiency and of alleged corruption in the New York City schools. "Some years ago the chancellor was caught in borrowing \$100,000 from the schools. I am told that he did not intend to pay it back. These things happen too much in New York. Why should we pour money in, when they are wasting what they have?"

I ask him, "Have we *any* obligations to poor people?"

"I don't think the burden is on us," says Jennifer again. "Taxing the rich to help the poor—we'd be getting nothing out of it. I don't understand how it would make a better educational experience for me."

"A child's in school only six hours in a day," says Max. "You've got to deal with what is happening at home. If his father's in the streets, his mother's using crack . . . how is money going to make a difference?"

David dismisses this and tells me, "Here's what we should do. Put more money into preschool, kindergarten, elementary years. Pay college kids to tutor inner-city children. Get rid of the property tax, which is too uneven, and use income taxes to support these schools. Pay teachers more to work in places like the Bronx. It has to come from taxes. Pay them extra to go into the worst schools. You could forgive their college loans to make it worth their while."

"Give the children Head Start classes," says another student. "If they need more buildings, given them extra money so they wouldn't need to be so crowded."

"It has got to come from taxes," David says again.

"I'm against busing," Max repeats, although this subject hasn't been brought up by anybody else in a long while.

"When people talk this way," says David, "they are saying, actually—" He stops and starts again: "They're saying that black kids will never learn. Even if you spend more in New York. Even if you bring them here to Rye. So what it means is—you are writing people off. You're just dismissing them. . . ."

"I'd like it if we had black students in this school," the girl beside him says.

"It seems rather odd," says David when the hour is up, "that we were sitting in an AP class discussing whether poor kids in the Bronx deserve to get an AP class. We are in a powerful position."

In his earnestness and in his willingness to search his conscience, David reminds me of some of the kids I knew during the civil rights campaigns of the mid-1960s. Standing here beside him and his teacher, it occurs to me that many

students from this town, much like those in Riverdale, were active in those struggles. Hundreds of kids from neighborhoods like these exposed themselves to all the dangers and the violence that waited for young volunteers in rural areas of Mississippi.

Today, after a quarter of a century, black and white children go to the same schools in many parts of Mississippi—the public schools of Mississippi are, in fact, far more desegregated now than public schools in New York City—but the schools are very poor. In 1987, when a child in Great Neck or Manhasset was receiving education costing some \$11,000, children in Neshoba County, Mississippi, scene of many of the bloodiest events during the voter registration drives of 23 years before, received some \$1,500 for their education. In equally poor Greene County, Mississippi, things got so bad in the winter of 1988 that children enrolled at Sand Hill Elementary School had to bring toilet paper, as well as writing paper, from their homes because, according to the *Jackson Daily News*, "the school has no money for supplies." In the same year, *Time* magazine described conditions in the Mississippi town of Tunica. The roof of a junior high school building in the district had "collapsed" some years before, the magazine reported, but the district had no money for repairs. School desks were "split" and textbooks were "rotting," said *Time*. "Outside, there is no playground equipment."

At Humphreys County High School, in the Mississippi Delta, the science lab has no equipment except a tattered periodic table. "The only air conditioning," says a recent visitor, "is a hole in the roof." In June and September, when the temperature outside can reach 100 degrees, the school is "double hot," according to the principal. Children graduating from the school, he says, have little to look forward to except low-paid employment at a local catfish plant.

Until 1983, Mississippi was one of the few states with no kindergarten program and without compulsory attendance laws. Governor William Winter tried that year to get the legislature to approve a \$60-million plan to upgrade public education. The plan included early childhood education, higher teacher salaries, a better math and science program

for the high schools, and compulsory attendance with provisions for enforcement. The state's powerful oil corporations, facing a modest increase in their taxes to support the plan, lobbied vigorously against it. The Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association began a television advertising campaign to defeat the bill, according to a *Newsweek* story.

"The vested interests are just too powerful," a state legislator said. Those interests, according to *Newsweek*, are "unlikely" to rush to the aid of public schools that serve poor children.

It is unlikely that the parents or the kids in Rye or Riverdale know much about realities like these; and, if they do, they may well tell themselves that Mississippi is a distant place and that they have work enough to do to face inequities in New York City. But, in reality, the plight of children in the South Bronx of New York is almost as far from them as that of children in the farthest reaches of the South.

All of these children say the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. Whether in the New York suburbs, Mississippi, or the South Bronx, they salute the same flag. They place their hands across their hearts and join their voices in a tribute to "one nation indivisible" which promises liberty and justice to all people. What is the danger that the people in a town like Rye would face if they resolved to make this statement true? How much would it really harm their children to compete in a fair race?

Children of the City Invincible: Camden, New Jersey

Money," writes the *Wall Street Journal*, "doesn't buy better education. . . . The evidence can scarcely be clearer."

The paper notes that student achievement has been static in the nation while per-pupil spending has increased by \$1,800 in five years, after adjusting for inflation. "The investment," says the *Journal*, "hasn't paid off."

What the *Journal* does not add is that per-pupil spending grew at the same rate in the suburbs as it did in urban districts, and quite frequently at faster rates, thereby preventing any catch-up by the urban schools. Then, too, the *Journal* does not tell its readers that the current average figure masks disparities between the schools that spend above \$12,000 (Rye, New York, for instance) and the ones that spend less than \$3,000. Many of the poorest schools today spend less than the average district spent ten years ago.

"Increasing teachers' salaries doesn't mean better schooling," continues the *Journal*. "More experienced teach-